

Social and Psychological Aspects of Dying in Old Age
ESRC Seminar Series: February 2007 – May 2008

Background

Death is the one certainty all people face in their lives. Although the timing and nature of this death is uncertain, as people age their death becomes more imminent. What sense can be made of this at a societal and individual level? Within Western society, death engenders complex personal responses and as a result we find it hard to address the needs of people as they face dying and death. People hold different meanings for this transition, from life to death, and these different constructions shape the way in which the transition from life to death is perceived, managed and experienced by older people. This influences the process of dying, the priorities older people express, the places where they experience their dying and the planning they may wish to engage with around their own end of life.

Two bodies of knowledge: palliative care and gerontology underpin the care provided for older people as they near their own dying and death. Both palliative care, which seeks to address care for people dying at the end of life, and gerontology, which considers the manifestations of and management of ageing, acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of their work. However, until relatively recently neither discipline has paid adequate attention to the issues of concern in the other speciality. Palliative care, with its origins in hospice work that meets the needs of people with cancer has only recently begun to consider how the needs of people with conditions other than cancer¹ and older people can be met². Similarly, gerontology with its focus on healthy ageing has paid little attention to the ultimate life transition that all older people face, that of dying and death³.

There is the potential to create a new dynamic area of knowledge that is reflective of, and relevant to older people with regard to dying in old age, synthesising knowledge, drawn from these two areas, and others.

Aim of Seminar Series

To generate an integrated theoretical perspective that informs policy and practice knowledge in relation to the meaning and experiences of dying in old age.

Objectives

1. To engage established and new researchers, members of the interested wider community, health and social care professions, policymakers, user groups and agencies in a process of dialogue regarding dying in old age;
2. To develop understandings of dying in old age that will inform theory development, research, service provision and policy development;
3. To support the development of researchers in this area of work by the presentation, discussion and dissemination of cutting edge research

4. To promote researcher-user alliances and develop research proposals for submission to grant funding bodies, such as the ESRC New Dynamics of Ageing Programme and the other relevant agencies.
5. To prepare working papers that present a synthesis of the new knowledge generated.

Assumptions Underpinning this Seminar Series

An aim of this seminar series has been to create a place of dialogue, so that we assume that there is no one right position, but we all stand in our own positions, of which we may be more or less aware. We all bring our own experiences and knowledge to the discussion and listening to others helps us understand our own experiences in a wider context. We want to map out the different, sometimes, contradictory experiences present in order to present a fuller picture than is sometimes acknowledged by policy makers or service providers.